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POLARPAM

The Hunt Before



By

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Illustrator

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It was Fall in Gwich'in Territory, and the time was drawing near for the caribou hunt. Each year at this time the caribou herds moved south, through the mountain passes and across the river into the wooded wintering grounds. The people looked forward to killing many caribou as they passed through the area. They needed meat to last through the winter, and they needed furs for clothing.

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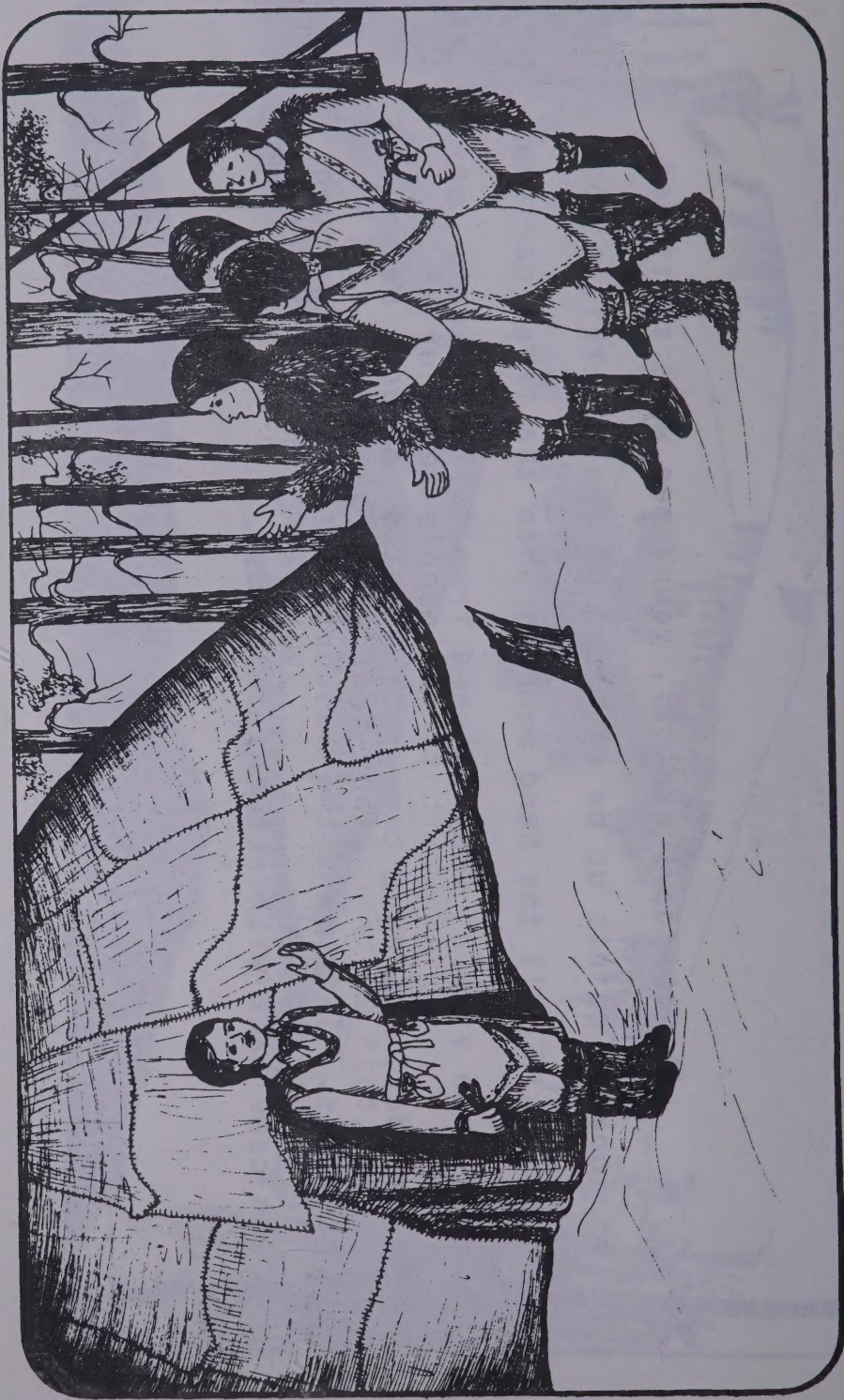
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Groups of men went out from the main camp every day to repair the long caribou fence. They wanted to be ready for the herds when they came. A broken caribou fence meant that many of the animals could escape, and the kill would be poor.



As the days went by, young men were stationed at lookout points up on the tops of the foothills so they could tell the band members when the first caribou came into view. They watched from their lookouts day after day, but none came. The band members became restless. They sent the lookouts out again. The young men came back with nothing to report.



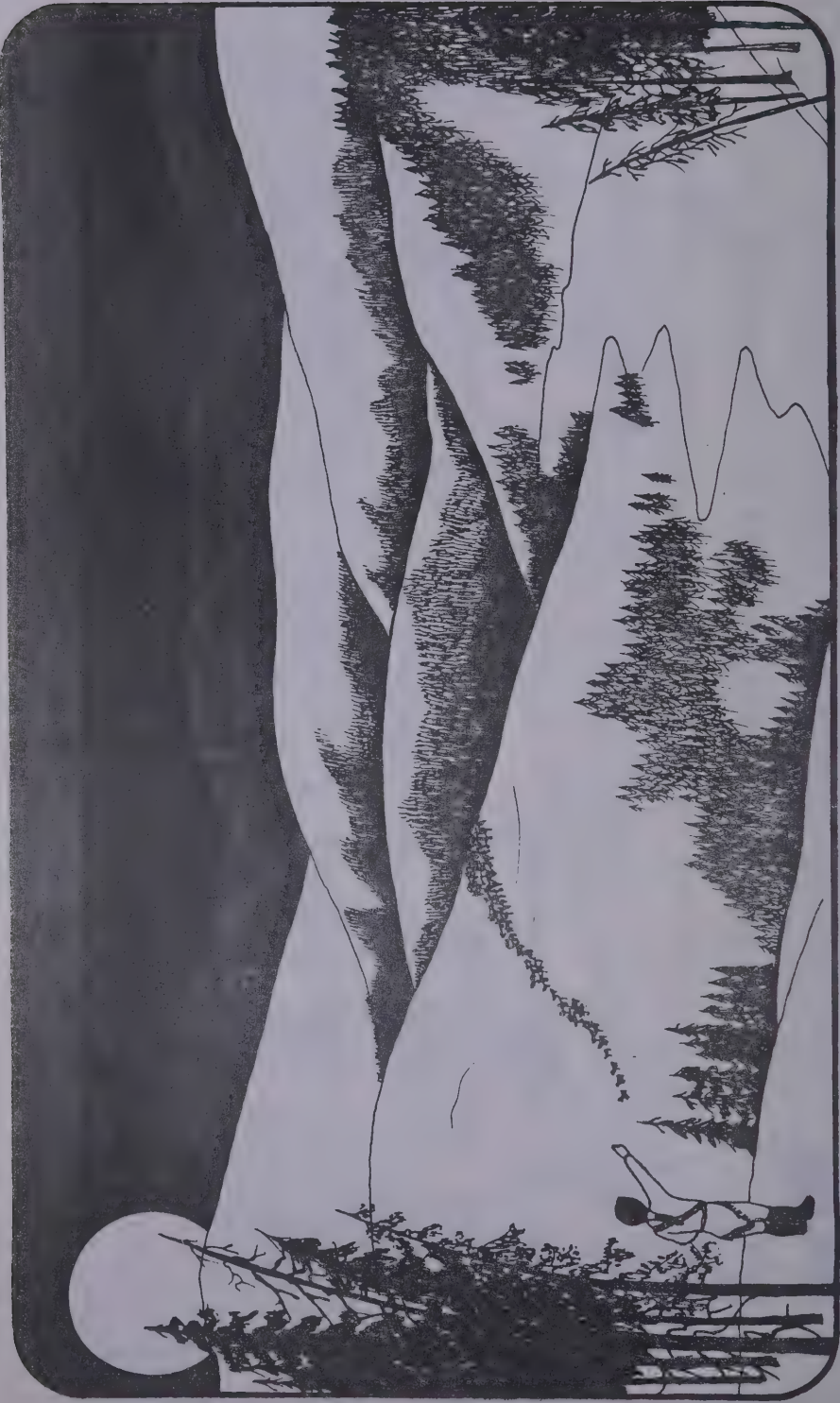
Finally, the adults got together and decided that it was time to ask for help from a medicine man -- someone who was able to speak directly with the spirits of the caribou. A medicine man could convince the spirits to send the caribou near camp so the coming hunt would be a good one.



The medicine man agreed to perform. He had his helpers pile up a big mound of snow outside. Then he had them build a fire near the snow pile. As the fire began to glow, the people gathered around it and the mound of snow, and waited for the medicine man to begin.



The medicine man stepped into the center of the circle the people had formed. He walked around the fire. He began to sing. Then he walked up to the pile of snow, and rolled the sleeve of his parka up to his elbow. He stuck his arm into the pile of snow. The people could see him struggling. He had hold of something under the snow. Suddenly, he pulled a full-grown caribou half-way out of the snow mound! The people gasped in surprise. The medicine man then pushed the animal back into the snow, until no sign of it could be seen.



After that, the people felt sure
that their caribou hunt would be a good one.

BEFORE THE HUNT

Adapted from McKennan, The Chandalar Kutchin (1965:80).

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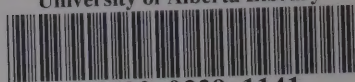
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